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SUBJECT: PHASE 4 VOTER REGISTRATION IS A STRONG FINISH

REF: A. KABUL 000154
[B](#). KABUL 000237
[C](#). KABUL 000313

[1](#). (SBU) The fourth and final phase of the voter registration update for the 2009 presidential and provincial council elections ended February 20. A few districts that opened late will operate additional days to complete the full thirty-day registration period (REF A.) As of February 19, Independent Election Commission (IEC) figures show 495,484 new voters joined the rolls in the four southern provinces: 275,020 in Kandahar; 133,313 in Helmand; 66,687 in Uruzgan; and 20,464 in Nimroz. This total is 39 per cent of the number of voters registered by 2005, putting Phase 4 near the rest of the country, where the comparable figure is 42 percent. Some 32 percent of new Phase 4 voters were women, almost equal to the 39 percent for the other three phases.

VIOLENCE - THE DOG DID NOTHING IN THE NIGHTTIME

[2](#). (SBU) Contrary to the expectations of Afghan and international security forces, the Taliban fighters that drove violence in the south up to new levels in 2008 did not target the Phase 4 voter registration process. Public statements by Taliban leaders in Pakistan threatening voters and condemning elections did not translate into a campaign of killings or bombings. This curious fact meant that in thirty days of voter registration, no election workers were killed, no electoral offices or voter registration sites were attacked, and intimidation and harassment of voters was ineffective. Frequent targets of Taliban operations -- such as police and moderate religious figures -- continued to come under attack, so that some violent incidents overlapped with the voter registration process. As reported REF B, police arrested suspects after two men shot and killed a police officer outside a Kandahar city voter registration site. On February 22 Kandahar provincial security chiefs told the media that police discovered and defused more than 100 bombs in the past two months, but that voter registration had finished without major security incidents.

[3](#). (SBU) The established presence of Taliban in five Helmand districts and two Kandahar districts, and the consequent inability of government representatives and security forces to operate there, curtailed opportunities for these citizens to register. Electoral officials cite numerous anecdotes indicating residents of these areas traveled to other registration sites. Demand in Helmand's capital city of Lashkar Gah exceeded expectations, most likely as a result of such displacements (REF C.) The IEC also opened substitute sites near the two closed districts in Kandahar (REF A.)

LOCAL LEADERSHIP

14. (SBU) Zekria Barakzai, Deputy Chief Technical Officer of the IEC, on February 22 said the support of grassroots religious leaders and certain provincial governors was key to the success of Phase 4 operations. The IEC hired as many local mullahs as possible to work as civic educators and election workers. Among local officials, Helmand's Governor Mangal was especially active in voter outreach, holding a variety of meetings and rallies in outlying areas despite substantial threat to his personal security. Mangal, as noted septel, is not part of President Karzai's circle of political favorites, a fact that rebuts suspicions the governor misallocated state resources to favor the incumbent. Uruzgan's Governor Hamdan, in contrast, remained distant from the voter registration process, and refused even to work in his office in the wake of the February 2 suicide attack on the nearby police station in Tarin Kowt.

NATIONAL POLITICS

15. (SBU) Helmand and Kandahar, seen as the Pashtun homelands and the key battlefield with the Taliban, loom disproportionately large in national politics. The success of voter registration there does much to push aside earlier speculation that insecurity would disenfranchise Pashtuns and discredit the elections. Karzai and his rivals increasingly appear ready to acknowledge that the race is on.
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